

Self-Directed Writing: Giving Voice to Student Writers

Sharing samples of student writing and integrating theories from well-known compositionists, Lovejoy offers a powerful rationale for assigning writing that suits students' purposes.

In today's teaching environment, writing and language arts teachers face real challenges, both professionally and personally. Professionally, we know what is expected of us and what abilities our students will need to succeed in academia and in the real world. We are cognizant of the pressures from inside and outside our institutions to prepare students to perform on tests and to show their learning. For many teachers, the emphasis on test scores has driven curriculum content and pedagogy. When we consider what it was that first appealed to us about the profession, we may often feel the pull, the tension, between our classroom practices and our deep-seated beliefs and experiences that first brought us to the classroom door. I believe as teachers we have all shared these moments of tension, and we have all asked ourselves if we are effectively communicating the passion for reading and writing that motivated our interest in language and literacy. In these moments, I ask myself whether I have taken the time to connect with students' lives, hear their stories, understand their frustrations, and discover what each brings to the classroom as a social context for learning.

We can reclaim the passion for reading and writing that often gets buried in times when curricular and legislative mandates become the focus of attention in a testing environment. With schools becoming increasingly more diverse, I want to suggest "self-directed writing" as a way to build a community of diverse writers who share their knowledge and interests, and who strive for clear, effective communication.

Rethinking Pedagogy

As most teachers today know firsthand, our classrooms are changing demographically and becoming increasingly diverse, and our pedagogy must change accordingly to meet students' needs. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, nearly 40% of students in public education in 2000 were students of color, almost doubling in a 20-year span, with 90% of teachers in public schools being White (Ball and Ellis 499). In 2006, the percentage of students of color in our public schools grew to 43% (Planty et al.). This particular combination of increasing student diversity and a predominately White teaching staff, according to Arnetha F. Ball and Pamela Ellis, reinforces the need for "cross-cultural communication and identity development," which the authors regard as "key factors in students' academic achievement" (499).

Steven Zemelman and Harvey Daniels in *A Community of Writers: Teaching Writing in the Junior and Senior High School*, a widely used resource on the teaching of writing, state that one of the most important elements promoting growth in student writing is the teacher's understanding and appreciation of "the basic linguistic competence that students bring with them to school" (20). The authors emphasize the importance of social context as a leading contributor to gains in writing development and student learning:

Whether you are conscious of it or not, your classroom is a fertile social context for literacy learning. And if linguists are right that the social context is the driving force behind literacy acqui-

sition, then *the social context of your English/language arts classroom is the most powerful and important variable you can experiment with*. More important than what textbook or speller or dictionary to use; more important than what kinds of assignments to give; more important than the criteria by which you assign kids to peer response groups; more important than ‘teaching Graves’ versus teaching Calkins or Hillocks. More important than anything else. (50–51; italics in original)

The social context of the classroom embodies open and honest communication among students and between students and teacher, along with respect for and knowledge about linguistic and cultural differences. In writing about the linguistic varieties that fill our classrooms and, conversely, the privileging of Standard American English, Joan Wynne writes:

by fostering prejudice such as language biases, we stifle all students’ cognitive development. Thinking their language is a superior language, which is, after all, what too many teachers teach and too many in society believe, White [students] may become incapable of really hearing other cultures and, thus, learning from them. For as long as mainstream students think that another’s language is inferior to theirs, they will probably not bother to understand it, and therefore, there will be much about the other they will fail to understand. (209)

Wynne reminds us of the importance of talking about language differences so that students understand language, in all its

diversity, as “embrace[ing] a wide range of human competencies and capacities” (Hale et al. 35). The student’s language and cultural experiences are valuable resources, and when teachers create space for writing activities that value these differences and build positive social relationships, learning is a natural result.

The importance of a social context that is supportive and student-centered is manifested in Lisa Delpit’s “No Kinda Sense,” a narrative essay about her daughter Maya, one of only six African Americans

attending a private high school. Growing up speaking mainstream English, Maya comes home from school one day and asks her mother’s permission to have plastic surgery on her lips. Delpit tells us how she then placed her daughter in the public school where the majority of students were African American. Maya acclimates to her new school setting and comes home excited and happy, but she’s speaking a different language—Ebonics. Delpit then ponders how one can acquire a second language so quickly and effortlessly. She asks herself: What conditions were in force in the public school that enabled Maya to learn Ebonics, and how can we replicate those same conditions in our classrooms so that students will want to learn our language, the target language of the schools? Her response is to provide topics that students find relevant and engaging and to create a social context in which students feel connected.

In my writing classes, I have revised my pedagogy so that students have greater opportunities to share their knowledge through self-directed writing. It is writing that brings new and relevant information into the classroom, builds positive relationships among the students and teacher as writers, and leads to gains in writing abilities. Self-directed writing is an opportunity for students to draw on their own resources, not only what they know and care about but also how they may choose to say it. And it is consistent with James Britton’s theory of development in student writing, a theory based on analyses of student writing in British secondary schools.

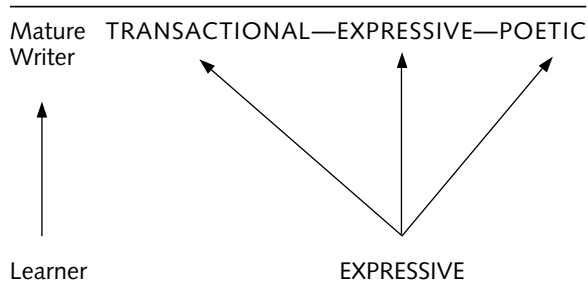
Framing Self-Directed Writing

James Britton et al.’s theory of writing development is a useful framework for understanding the role of self-directed writing in composition instruction. Britton’s notion of “expressive” writing is often misunderstood to mean only writing about the self, but it is much more than that. In Britton’s model, expressive writing is the basis for the three principal functions of writing: Poetic, Expressive, and Transactional (see fig. 1).

Expressive is the most important term in this model. Britton describes it as “an utterance that ‘stays close to the speaker’. . . . It is a verbalization of the speaker’s immediate preoccupations and his

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FIGURE 1. Britton's Theory of Writing Development (from Britton et al. 83)



The expressive as a matrix for the development of other forms of writing.

mood of the moment.” He goes on to say: “it is an utterance at its most relaxed and intimate, as free as possible from outside demands, whether those of a task or of an audience.” According to Britton, the expressive mode is the way we relate to each other in speech and the way we frame the first drafts of new ideas (Britton et al. 82).

Britton makes an important point about the development of writing ability in that not everyone’s first attempts at writing are expressive. However, he reminds us that it is a key element in writing instruction: “it must be true that until a [student] does write expressively he is failing to feed into the writing process the fullness of his linguistic resources—the knowledge of words and structures he has built up in speech—and that it will take him longer to arrive at the point where writing can serve a range of his purposes as broad and diverse as the purposes for which he uses speech” (Britton et al. 82).

I suspect many teachers interpret “expressive” to mean writing about or for the self, that is, on topics obviously close to the writer’s experience and therefore easier (i.e., not as much cognitive load; more time for students to deal with other aspects of writing). I don’t think many teachers even consider language itself as a variable in this respect. They don’t associate “expressive” with home language or natural language; rather, they expect students to write in Standard English or in their best approximation of school writing. Students, too, because they learn writing in the schools, are not likely to use their home language or even feel com-

fortable using it in school. In working with her Creole-speaking students, for example, Eileen Kennedy invited them to write in Creole, but she wasn’t successful at first because they had never done it and some didn’t know how (there were no orthographic standards). However, when she began to share her experiences with language prejudice and gained their trust, they began to experiment with their language. Kennedy reports that enabling her students to write in their home language was instrumental in helping them acquire the conventions of Standard English. Britton et al.’s description of expressive writing includes the student’s home and community language and supports the legitimacy and instructional power of language differences in the classroom.

When students write expressively, they should be encouraged to draw on the resources of their language as they write about the ideas that matter to them the most.

In Britton’s theory, students begin their exploration in the expressive mode, and as their writing progresses, it moves into “the three different kinds of mature writing.” In the “mature” expressive mode, the writing is intended for some audience other than the writer, but the presence of the writer remains a focal point in the text. If the writing moves toward the transactional mode, it becomes more explicit, more context-independent, more tightly organized, and less personal. If it moves toward the poetic mode, it becomes a “verbal object,” with emphasis on the internal structure of the piece—the form becomes the focus of attention.

Self-Directed Writing

Self-directed writing is an opportunity for teachers to write with their students, and it’s writing that ultimately ends up in the student’s portfolio at mid-term and end of term. It’s one component of a structured writing class in which students also do other writing assignments. Teachers can easily adapt self-directed writing to their classes, but it’s important that students know that their work is

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valued as part of the curriculum. It's also important for teachers to communicate their expectations of finished pieces. Some teachers and students might think that this kind of writing is "anything goes"—unstructured and useless. However, self-directed writing that's taken to completion—a decision the writer makes—always communicates something meaningful and employs language effectively, even when it doesn't conform to edited American English; it holds the reader's attention, is often creative and inventive, and is always clear and coherent—all the features that we expect in good writing.

In my classes, self-directed writing fulfills a number of objectives, which I enumerate and explain below.

To Give Students Freedom to Write about Topics Important to Them

Students choose their own topics, and they write in class and out of class, along with the teacher. We begin by each generating a list of topics, and then we talk in small groups about the items in our list. As students hear the topics on other students' lists, they add more topics to their lists, and they continue to add topics throughout the semester. We call this the Topics List, which is personal to each student. I tell them they will have time to write about their topics in class and that I expect them to continue writing out of class as well. They can write about any topic—a favorite movie or book, an interesting person, a song, a current issue, a concert or favorite group, a travel destination or special place, a hobby, a personal experience, a school dilemma—and in any genre—a letter, a poem, a story, a dialogue, a cartoon, a song, a review, an essay, etc.

The first drafts of these self-directed writings are similar in form to Peter Elbow's freewriting, but unlike freewriting, students are not writing nonstop in a timed activity. When we write in class, students know there are obvious time constraints; in Britton's words, the writing is "relaxed and intimate, as free as possible from outside demands" (Britton et al. 82). They are writing for themselves—to get their thinking onto the page. In the following example, John, a first-year college student, writes about his perception of getting old and his concern, as with many college students, about not having found his passion. It is clearly an

early draft, and his topic is personally relevant and timely.

Growing old. Im listening to a track by Pigeon John, entitled Growing Old. He talks about hip hop in the late 80s and how he misses it. I think Im growing old too sometimes.

One example, is video games. Before, when I was little if I got a new game, that was it. I would play it until I beat it, and then some more if I liked it a lot. I remember staying up until my bed time playing Super Nintendo and Sega, getting a new game and just being so excited. I feel like I've lost that part of me now. Ive got some Wii games that I've never even played. How is this happening?

Another thing is I catch myself acting like my brother when I was little. Sometimes I'll say the exact same things he used to say to me that just pissed me off, and I think, what is going on? I know being around people they rub off on you and can influence your actions, but some actions are the exact same. Scares me sometimes.

Then I think, well maybe I'm just maturing. Who wants to mature and grow up, not me. I see these grown ups, there all grumpy and blah blah blah all the time, don't seem to have a lot of fun or be playful. I know Ive got responsibilities, but I just don't want to end up like so many people I know. Im afraid I will.

Some nights I cant sleep because I think about whats going on in my life. School is going, relationships are there, but Im missing a passion still. I guess I would trade passion for growing old, yeah I would do that any day.

As students consider topics for their writing, I encourage them to write about their issues as new college students and their developing identities. When I read John's piece, I wanted him to know that he communicated something personal and honest about his experience and that other students could benefit as well if he chose to revise this draft. When responding to early drafts, I focus on the content of the writer's topic, affirming an idea or raising a question. I refrain from commenting on matters of convention because I want the writer to think about the meaning of the piece.

To Create Continuous Opportunities to Write

Self-directed writing is a major component of my writing class, counting as much as 25% of the total course grade. Students also complete major paper



assignments (e.g., an autobiographical essay, a summary-strong response essay), which tend to be longer and more involved pieces of writing. Their self-directed writing consists of short pieces, often no more than one page typed and double-spaced. But it's continuous writing throughout the semester: they either write in class or out of class, and they average three to four new writings a week. Some students write more. Their first drafts are written for themselves and are not shared, though they know everything they write gets turned in. The pages they don't want me to read, they simply fold to be counted but not read.

To Create Community by Sharing Writing about Topics That Students Value

At designated times, students know that they must select a piece from their writings to share with their peers. When they select a piece, they revise it for other readers besides themselves. This process of sharing begins gradually. I may start by asking students to pick one piece to talk about with their peers in small groups. This is a time for students to share aspects of their lives and interests, to ask questions about the topic shared, to get to know each other, their commonalities and differences. Another time I may ask them to read aloud one piece to others in their group, followed by oral peer responses identifying something they liked and something that was less clear. Then I may ask them to exchange a piece of writing with a peer for a written response.

As a teacher, I participate in these group discussions, talking about topics I'm interested in and exchanging pieces for feedback.

To Encourage Students to Write Freely, in Their Natural Voices, as well as to Experiment with Varieties of English and Genres

I invite students to explore their language as they write, the language that is most natural and comfortable, as well as the varieties they know or have heard but may not have used as writers. This is their opportunity to write about topics that matter to them in ways

that seem fitting and natural. I bring in samples of writing I've collected showing different genres and styles—samples for analysis and discussion, illustrating different genres of writing as well as dialectal varieties (e.g., ads, blogs, IMs, cartoons, dramatic dialogue, letters to the editor, excerpts from fiction such as Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, excerpts from nonfiction such as Lee Tonouchi's *Da Word*). I want students to sample the range of their choices (see, e.g., Lovejoy). Julie Hagemann, in "A Bridge from Home to School: Helping Working Class Students Acquire School Literacy," writes about an overt pedagogy that values the home language of nonmainstream English users, but she places all the emphasis on code-switching, making students aware of their language and how it varies from Standard English, and she argues that doing so makes students less defensive about their language and more open to learning the conventions of academic English. This is a useful strategy for some kinds of writing, but I would argue that we need to make explicit how students can use their language without all the fuss about code-switching.

I'm not suggesting that this kind of writing replace more formal writing in which students learn the forms and conventions of academic writing. I devote most class time to these more formal kinds of

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writing, and I make it clear to students that code-switching in writing is often necessary. But I don't think it's irresponsible to talk about "Englishes," varieties of English students use every day such as African American language, teen dialect (publiect), or a variety associated with instant messaging, and to encourage writing in which they get to use Englishes other than Standard English.

When we discuss samples of writing in my class, we talk about writing as situated, as having a context, and the writer's choices as purposeful. We

talk about Standard English, or edited American English, and varieties of English that do not conform to such rigid expectations and yet communicate powerful meanings. I want students to understand that language is rich and multifaceted, capable of expressing complex meanings in diverse ways. These varieties have traditionally been barred

from the classroom, varieties that reflect students' textual worlds, and in my approach, they form the basis for instruction in academic writing.

The following are some samples of writing that I use to open discussions of language and difference:

I walked into the room. My drawer was open. Something was lying beside it. White. That's when I saw it. The torn sock. My brand new one. I searched the room. Behind me. Then in front. Finally, I spotted her. She lay on the other side of my bed. Ah, Hah! Her tail was down and her face was stained in guilt. It was Ecstasy, my pit bull. Another pair of my new socks bite the dust!—DH, student writer

Laurie wuz my friend, not by choice, more by default. She came our school from Oregon fourt' grade time. Since den da teachers always put us together in da smaht group. I mostly only talked to her in class, recess time I cruised wit my friends. We got along pretty good, except fo' da fack dat she wuz competitive, dat wuz one of her idiosyncrasies. Das my new word I wen learn.—nonfiction, from Tonouchi's *Da Word* (9)

FR. HI-SPD INT. SND. MSGS. FASTR. GR8!—text from an advertisement for Holiday Inn in *Time* magazine

It fascinates me how differently we all speak in different circumstances. We have levels of formality, as in our clothing. There are very formal occasions, often requiring written English: the job application or the letter to the editor—the dark suit, serious-tie language with everything pressed and the lint brushed off. There is our less formal out-in-the-world language—a more comfortable suit, but still respectable. There is language for close friends in the evenings, on weekends—blue-jeans-and-sweat-shirt language, when it's good to get the tie off. There is family language, even more relaxed, full of grammatical short cuts, family slang, echoes of old jokes that have become intimate shorthand—the language of pajamas and uncombed hair. Finally, there is the language with no clothes on; the talk of couples—murmurs, sighs, grunts—language at its least self-conscious, open, vulnerable, and primitive.—nonfiction, from MacNeil's "English Belongs to Everybody" (130)

With the exception of the student sample, all of these are published works, and they serve to expand students' perceptions of "good writing" as well as their understanding of language differences and their power to communicate.

To Involve Students in the Process of Writing: Drafting, Selecting, Revising, Editing, Publishing, and Sometimes Performing Finished Pieces

In Britton's model, all writing begins as expressive and then, if the writer chooses, develops into "mature" writing in one of the dominant modes—expressive, transactional, or poetic. Self-directed writing utilizes all aspects of the writing process, from idea generation to polishing, editing, proofreading, and publishing. Some of the pieces students write are shared with their peers; some are not. I may ask them to share one piece of their writing for a peer response; I may ask them to read aloud one piece of their writing in a small group for oral feedback. Some pieces are graded; others are not. They decide the pieces they want to share, and they choose the pieces they want to submit for a grade. But anything they submit for a grade is a finished piece, a piece they have shared with peers and with me for feedback, and a piece they've revised, edited, and carefully proofread.

When students are given opportunities to write about their own topics and to write for different purposes and audiences, they learn that language need not be as rigid as they might have thought.

In other words, much of what they write is unfinished and unpolished but writing nevertheless—writing about this and that. Writing for themselves. And, some of these pieces they will select to share with others, get feedback, revise, and submit for evaluation.

To Extend Students' Views of Language and Literacy (and What Constitutes "Good" Writing)

When students are given opportunities to write about their own topics and to write for different purposes and audiences, they learn that language need not be as rigid as they might have thought. In an environment that allows for difference, students are amazingly inventive, and they are eager to share their knowledge and abilities. All students, regardless of their previous exposure to Standard English, whether mainstream or nonmainstream students, should gain an understanding of language differences in their educational experiences, and the writing classroom is the ideal place for such learning to begin. Through their experiences reading other students' work or talking about language choices in class discussions, students learn about language as a dynamic cultural entity, and they are eager to discover its uses in their self-directed writing.

In an eight-week period, students may write as many as 30 pieces, some of which they have shared with their peers for feedback and have revised. When they submit their mid-term portfolio, I ask them to select four or five pieces to feature for evaluation, and I specify that the pieces they select should show the range of their abilities and the reach of their exploration. I also ask them to submit all their other pieces too as evidence of their work, and the ones they don't want me to read they simply fold. These self-directed pieces are evaluated as part of the entire portfolio, which earns a single grade based on the student's progress toward achieving the course goals.

Student Responses to Self-Directed Writing

In both the mid-term and final portfolios, students write reflective pieces about the contents of their portfolios. I was surprised by the number of stu-

dents who said they had never had an opportunity to write on their own topics.

I really enjoyed the self-directed writing portion of the class. I have never had a class where I can just write about anything. I think the freedom of making my own choices made it much easier to write.

The self-directed writings were somewhat of a new experience, an enjoyable experience. I chose to present my three favorite writings in this portfolio: "Hip Hop Still Lives," "Love of Music," and "Super Bowl XLII." . . . My favorite thing about this class is the self-directed writing.


Some students also thought the continuous writing helped them to find more time to write, and they commented on how it helped them to get to know their peers as well as for the teacher to get to know students.

This class has given me the opportunity to make time to write. I have enjoyed the self-directed aspect of it, in that we can write what comes to mind using our own language. It also gives us a chance to be creative. I think it gives you a good sense of who we are as writers and people, and as we have shared with others it has given us insight on our classmates.

As I alluded to earlier, some students initially thought the self-directed writing was just a way to fill class time, but their attitudes changed as they began to interact with each other about their topics and to see their writing as integrally related to their learning.

Let me begin with the self-directed writings. To be honest, I started out not wanting to write them. My first assumption was that these were time wasters. But as I began to write more of them, I started to enjoy what I was putting on paper. More of me began to come out and I have now begun to enjoy them. . . . I do have to say that I would've never reached this point in writing if not for all the self-directed writing we had to do in the first seven weeks. . . . The bottom line is that you got me to write without thinking I was; and that is what I loved most about the class.

Self-directed writing, as the student testimonials demonstrate, is one way to engage students by giving them choice and the freedom to write on topics important to them. It also serves to build a community of learners engaged in writing and communicating. It enables students to discover their voices as well

as to extend their abilities as writers. At the end of the semester, I invite students to perform a favorite piece in a read-aloud to the class, writers sharing with other writers. I also invite students to submit two self-directed pieces for a class anthology, which I assemble along with brief biographical details about the writers. I have found that students are more open to learning the forms and conventions of academic writing when they know that their writing is valued and integral to their development as writers. 

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Joyce Bruett, RWT

Lovejoy states that embracing students' language by generating writing activities that value the differences rather than embracing only Standard English creates an opportunity for students to write what they know and care about in a way they choose to say it. In "Exploring Language and Identity: Amy Tan's 'Mother Tongue' and Beyond," students explore fiction and nonfiction texts and write literary narratives as a part of their exploration of these issues of language and identity. Students should find a connection to this lesson as it is geared toward the students and the way they interact with their own language and the languages that are used around them. http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=910